Seven Little Ducks by Basilintime

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Summary:

It has been defeated. Eddie's recovering in the hospital and a surprise visitor comes to see the Losers at the townhouse.

Richie worries that the things he saw while trapped in the deadlights may still come true. Bev and him make a promise to not let that happen.

1. Mother Duck This Shit

Stanley Uris had taken his bath and he expected that would be the end of it. In the end when it had come time to face his fears, Stan had found his biggest one was death. Not his death, no, but being responsible for the deaths of his friends. In the end, he feared that his fears would get the best of him and that it would cost the rest of the Losers.

He wasn't sure what he expected when he chose death. Quiet and silence and an end to everything was high on the list of possibilities. Perhaps it would be finding himself in Sheol with all the other dead. Maybe it would be like a long sleep until he faced some final judgement. Maybe that final judgement had already come to pass.

Stanley Uris went into death with a morbid sense of curiosity as far as what would meet him. What had greeted him instead had felt like an odd sort of teleportation; a shift in environment that occurred within the blink of an eye. He had gone from being in the bath with the water darkening and his warning scrawled on the wall in red to suddenly finding himself groggy and disoriented as he lay in a hospital bed.

There had been a lot of questions then. A lot of lying as well. Stan didn't like lying, especially since it meant lying to Patty, but if he told them the real reason he had tried to kill himself, they would have committed him. In the end, he had blamed himself and the fact that he wasn't able to give Patty a kid. He didn't know what else to say and it wasn't entirely a lie. It was a hidden half truth given the fact that his inability to have kids likely linked directly back to his childhood in Derry and the real thing he had been trying to escape.

It was to Derry that he went once he'd been released. It took some careful reassurances and explanations to Patty on why he felt the need to go. The assurance that he wouldn't be gone long but that it would help him heal in the end. He didn't want to worry her but Stan could only make one assumption on why he was still alive. The Losers had done it. They had finally defeated It.

Stan hadn't needed to call and ask to find where they all were. He'd known they'd be at the townhouse just like he knew they'd still be there despite it being over. Patty had wanted to come with him but he told her it was better if she didn't. That he would keep in touch and let her know he was safe but that he needed to do this on his own.

And now he stood at that door feeling nervous about knocking. Would they be mad at him for letting them down? Would Bill be disappointed? Stan had broken his promise, after all, and it was a pretty big promise to fucking break.

It took him a few moments before he raised his hand up to knock. It was a bit timid at first but then he knocked a little more firmly. It took a few moments but then Stan heard someone on the other side and the door swung open to reveal Richie standing there.

"Hey Richie."

"Fuck me…" Richie muttered the words and slammed the door in his face. Stan stood frowning at the door for a long moment. Hesitated before knocking again to try and see if Richie would open up and at least give him a chance to explain himself. Maybe Rich hadn't recognized him.

No, that wasn't true. Bev had been right when they were kids. He'd grown up to look the same just older. Even after his stint in the hospital, looking thinner and paler than he had before, Stan knew he was very clearly that same kid from the 80's.

"Richie? It's me. Stan…Stanley Uris." He knocked a third time as he called out just in case. The door was wrenched open for a second time unexpectedly and Richie was stared back at him with confusion. Stan gave him an expectant look, felt a little exasperated though he couldn't blame Rich if he was upset.

"So, I've seen a lot of really weird shit lately. This really shouldn't surprise me that much but you're supposed to be fucking dead, Stanley." Richie spoke at a fast pace, voice filled with a bit of nervous laughter as if he was doubting his sanity some. Stan winced just a little at the mention of his attempted death. He knew Patty had

told the Losers that he was gone; she'd honestly believed he would be at that point and to explain to someone who seemed a complete stranger had been more than she would have been able to handle.

"Well, I'm glad to tell you, Rich, that the rumors of my death have been greatly exaggera-okay, this is happening." Stanley was caught off guard when Richie pulled him in for a hug; tight and encompassing with a lingering scent of body odor that seemed to give such a full of a sense of loss that it made him reel. He found himself suddenly worried, scared that maybe there had been loss. That his return didn't herald that another of their numbers had taken his place.

"Shit, you missed so much fucked up shit, man. There was this moment where we saw you but it was just your head. You sprouted spider legs and tried to make out with me. It was really fucking wild. I mean, it was terrible, it was a lot of fucking terrible shit. But we fucking killed It. We finally fucking killed the goddamn clown."

Stan knew that the rambling was Richie's attempt to redirect. It always had been, talking and making jokes to keep the focus off what was important. He could hear it in his voice, that sense that there was too much and Richie didn't want to say it. Didn't want to confront it. A slurry of words to beat back his emotions.

So, Stan held on to him in return. Squeezed him tight as if all the years between them didn't exist. Held on as he felt his own equilibrium sway with the emotion of being back and being here; of that sense of guilt he hadn't really been trying to ignore but that felt a bit rawer in the moment.

"It's good to see you too, Richie."

Richie pulled back from Stan and seemed to take a good look at him then. Take in the khakis and the cardigan with the bandages peeking out from beneath its sleeves. Stan knew he was probably a bit of a sight especially given every thing that had likely happened. Richie shook his head in seeming disbelief though and gave him one of those crooked smiles.

“Jesus, I didn’t think you could have managed to become even more of an old man but look at you.”

“And I didn’t expect you to smell like day old ass but, well, here we are.” Stan threw it right back at him and felt a bit of relief when he heard his laugh in response. Richie reached forward to pat him several times in the cheek as Stan tried to bat his hand away for a second; sobering up as he knew there was a lot they’d need to talk about. “I’m sorry that I let you all down. That I wasn’t here for you all.”

“Shit, you were here, man. No need to apologize.” Rich gave a shake of his head, pulled him in for another hug despite Stan’s protest though he didn’t really fight it that hard. Richie really did smell like ass though.

“Stanny?” Bev’s voice grabbed his attention as he looked over Richie’s shoulder and saw her standing there. Behind her were the others all looking on in disbelief as she moved forward to pull him away from Richie to wrap him up in a hug herself. “Oh my god, Stan. You’re here…”

“Sorry I’m late.” Stan felt a bit overwhelmed then, could feel the tears in his eyes that he tried to blink back. He met Bill’s gaze, the look of disbelief and hurt and maybe a little bit of anger though Stan couldn’t blame him for that. Couldn’t blame any of them for that.

He didn’t have time to contemplate it though as suddenly they were all on him. Stan should have felt like he was suffocating between them all but instead he felt something he hadn’t in a long time. Stan felt like he was home; like he was complete. Five pairs of arms wrapped tightly around him.

Five?

Stan pulled back feeling a small stir of that fear once more. Counted once again to make sure he was right that one of them was missing.

“Where’s Eddie?” He looked to Richie when he said it

because he knew. He knew out of all of them Richie would always know precisely where Eddie was and that out of all of them Stan would be able to read the answer off him immediately. He saw a flicker of pain for a moment and felt like his worst dream had come true but then Richie had given him a sad sort of smile that didn't seem as terribly full of loss as he would have expected.

"He's at the hospital. He should be getting out in a couple days which, let me tell you, I think the doctors and nurses are all saying a fucking prayer for. I'm sure you can imagine just how insane he's driving them all."

Richie gave a soft shrug and that lingering unwashed scent made sense to Stan then. He would have been staying at Eddie's side if he was hurt. Stan felt a bit like he should tell him that most mating rituals typically included taking care of yourself too but bit his tongue.

"We-We'll take you to see him in the m-m-morning, Stan." Bill patted him gently on the shoulder, hand lingering there for a bit in what Stan knew was a reassurance. Bill wasn't mad at him; Bill was happy he had made it even if it was a day late and a dollar short. "I'm sure you're tired from your tr-tr-trip. We've got a room you can use upstairs."

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It was late but that much didn't matter much. Richie hadn't exactly slept much anyway as he tried to juggle the increasing number of phone calls from his agent while hovering close by Eddie's side while they waited for him to be released. Bev had dragged him back to the townhouse that night rather than let him stay with Eds. The group of them had ganged up on him and told him he needed rest and a heavily suggested shower.

They may have been right on the shower but Richie didn't think he really could rest especially after Stanley had risen from the dead and shown up on their doorstep. Every time he tried, he found himself startled awake by the nightmares. The visions. The remnants of the deadlights that he'd only escaped by the grace of Eddie with a busted old fence post.

He had snuck back down stairs after lying there in the silence for a long while. The house was quiet around him but he knew had seen the light on near the end of the hall. The room Bill had been using and Richie had little doubt he was in there talking with Stan about the details of what had happened.

Richie had done his best to stealth down the hall so not to disturb them and he now sat in the kitchen feeling the fatigue pulling on him while still feeling wide awake at the same time as he slowly nursed a beer from the fridge. He had too much shit on his mind even without the fucking deadlight nightmares.

"Why are you up?" Bev's voice came from behind him and Richie smiled a bit. She'd been checking on him a lot. Richie suspected that apart from Stan, she had known the longest. About him. About how he felt about Eddie. About a lot of things, truth be told, Bev and Stan had always been the ones who just seemed to know.

"Ah, you know, just burning some of that midnight oil." Richie gave a shrug as he took another sip of his beer. Let the bitter test help wash down the lingering sense of guilt and fear. He had a feeling they were going to have one of *those* conversation. A quiet conversation.

Richie wasn't really fond of quiet conversations. He'd spent so much of his life living loudly in an attempt to hide away all the truths he'd not wanted to face. This was a conversation Richie wasn't sure he could skip out of though. Not if he wanted to have some sort of peace of mind.

And if he was going to talk about the fucked up things he'd seen in the deadlights with anyone, Bev was the best choice. She'd understand. She knew what it was like, had seen the same things and lived with the nightmares even when none of them had remembered what the hell deadlights even were.

Bev opened the fridge to pull out a beer for herself before leaning against the kitchen island across from him. Richie offered her his bottle and they clinked them together lightly before both taking a sip.

“So…?” Bev raised an eyebrow at him and gave him one of those looks that meant she knew something was up and wasn’t going to budge until he told her. Richie ducked his head down a little so he could avoid her eyes while he tried to think. He really did hate facing this shit straight on.

He could see the bruises still on her wrists, had clocked them quickly when they’d all first gotten to Derry, violence she didn’t deserve. It was part of what had been keeping him up, the memory of violence, of different deaths that would have taken them all one by one.

“You think its all over? Like for real? No more It, no more loss, no more forgetting once we’ve all finally left this place?” There were some things Richie would be just fine forgetting but if it meant forgetting the Losers too…well, that wasn’t worth it. He hadn’t slept across two chairs for several nights in a hospital room next to Eddie just to forget about him again.

“I do. I think we kicked its ass and so we’re finally free.” Bev spoke gently, tugged at the sleeves of her sweatshirt that Richie was fairly positive belonged to Ben. “Do *you* think its all over?”

Richie pursed his lips together for a second and then gave a soft laugh that didn’t sound all that humorous to him. That was the bitch of the situation. He wasn’t convinced it was over but he didn’t know what he was supposed to do about it. It had fucked with his head and then almost killed the guy he sorta secretly loved and Richie couldn’t shake that It wasn’t done with them yet even if It was gone. And he couldn’t shake it now, that lingering sense that something was still wrong. That there was still a course that could let It win in the end.

“How did you see Stan die? Like, exactly?” Bev gave him a troubled look as she pulled one of the stools over to finally sit down. She had apparently realized this was going to be one of those quiet conversations as well. Well, in for a penny, in for a fucking pound.

“You know how I saw it happen.” Bev spoke carefully as she shifted her weight up onto the stool. Richie knew she probably thought he was losing it but none of them could claim to be

completely all together anymore.

"Yeah, I do. But the thing is I saw it differently. Like It knew Stan was still alive. I saw him lying there in the hospital just wasting away until they finally pulled the plug. He was the last of us still around and he knew that it had been all in vain cause we'd failed."

"But Rich, honey, we didn't fail. We beat It and Stan's here now." Bev dipped her head down in an attempt to catch his eyes and Richie glanced up at her. Her eyes were gentle but intense; she was a warrior as she always had been. How the hell some jack ass had believed for a second that he could keep her down was beyond him. Bev may have been made to forget just how strong she was but nothing could actually steal that strength away from her.

"Yeah, I know, it's just…worried that it doesn't change everything, ya know? Like, those possibilities are still out there. Sure, Stan managed to escape the course he was sent on but the rest of us haven't faced that trial yet."

"Then we'll make sure we're there for each other. We'll make sure if those things come to pass that none of us are alone to face them. Okay?" Bev set her hand on top of Richie's and he smiled a little; turned his palm upwards so that they each were gently gripping the other's wrist. A silent promise. They were the two that knew so they'd do what they could to continue making sure everyone was safe.

"Yeah, we can mother duck this shit. I just…what if we forget again? I mean, shit, I'm not staying in Derry any longer than I absolutely have to no matter what but what if we forget again. We all go our separate ways, except for you and Mr. Hunk of the Month upstairs, and it just slips away again. And then we don't know what to expect-"

"Beep beep, Richie." Bev spoke quietly, set a hand on top of his in an attempt to calm him down and he pulled back so he could take a swing of his beer. She gave him the kind of look that was typically reserved for Eddie when he was lecturing on the likelihood of them getting tetanus from wandering around an old field barefoot.

True story. Apparently, the bacteria lives in the soil.

It doesn't take a rusty nail to get tetanus, jackass.

"You get the shit beat out of you. Tom just snaps, he's an asshole by the way, I'm happy you're not going back to him. Please don't go anywhere near him ever again cause I just know he's a grade A asshole. I don't even have to meet the dumb ass. Bill drowns, some fucking how, that one was confusing because it was like a damn broke and he couldn't get out of its way in time. And Eddie… Eddie…"

Richie squeezed his eyes shut tight, felt like it'd gotten to be a little too much. So much for avoiding the fucking visions by not sleeping. He apparently was intent on digging them up to the surface even when he was awake. He finished off the beer, drained it and immediately shifted to get up to grab another one.

"Eddie was the pills. Too many of them at once can make you think you're sick and then he took more and more." Richie paused as he heard Bev speak behind him; he stared into the fridge for a long moment feeling that sense of hopelessness trying to finger its way into his chest.

"Eddie was first."

"Rich-"

"It *was* the pills. Not getting killed by It. Too many goddamn pills. She had to keep him sick, you know, when it wasn't enough just to *worry* so goddamn much. Had to make him realize that he still needed her. Who was going to look after him? Look how sick you are, Eddie. Have some fucking tea, it will make you feel better. I'll take care of you. You go off and almost die and now look at how sick you are, Eddie. Look-"

"Richie-"

"But it was too many fucking pills. Because when you're trying to poison someone just enough there's always that chance it will be too much. Too many, too high of a dose. He tried to leave one

too many times and how dare we be trying to take him from her. And so, she added more pills. Added more until it was too much and-"The sob broke out of him, threatened to make this quiet conversation a little less private.

Bev was moving over to him, pulling him to her as she hugged him close and gave him a buffer so he could calm down without calling the entire fucking house down. Richie sucked in a few deep breathes of air, tried to force all that damn emotion back down. He wasn't supposed to be the fragile one, he was supposed to be the funny one.

"You help all the guys muffle their crying with your rack, Bev, or am I just a special case?" It was a half-assed joke. Not his best. Still, he heard her exasperated laugh and she just hugged him even tighter and it was comforting. To be held. To have friends.

"You're just special, Rich. These puppies are all for you."

"Shit, it's a shame I'm gay then." It was the first time he'd actually said it out loud. He hadn't even really meant to and part of him turned ice cold as he waited for some sort of response.

"Well, I've been told all the cute ones are." It was soft, understanding and knowing. Bev had known. Shit, well, they probably all knew. Richie was starting to suspect that he hadn't really hidden his feelings for Eddie as well as he thought he had. Granted, here he was breaking down into a sobbing mess at the thought that he may still end up losing him even after dragging his ass out of a collapsing hell hole.

"We'll be on our guard, okay, Rich? We'll mother duck this, like you said, and we'll make damn sure that none of that happens, right?" Bev spoke quickly as she smoothed through his hair. Richie nodded because he wasn't sure he could do much else at that point. "We're going to be okay."

2. Knowing is Half the Battle

Summary for the Chapter:

> Bev is leaving Tom. Despite his agreement to be gone so that she can go and collect a few of her things, the rest of the Losers insist on joining her. She doesn't argue the point much, not knowing what she knows.
>
> The deadlights showed both Richie and her that Tom would be her end and they aren't taking any chances.

Notes for the Chapter:

> This chapter deals with Bev's relationship with Tom and, therefore, does mention some of the abuse he put her through and her reaction to his presence.

Knowing is half the battle. Why Bev still recalled that final phrase from an old G.I. Joe cartoon was beyond her. It had felt like a fitting phrase when they'd returned to Derry and they all suddenly remembered.

Beverly had remembered more though. She had remembered the possibilities.

She had thought one of those possibilities had already come to pass but then Stan had shown up at the door. Stan had already taken his bath and Bev's heart had broken as she remembered that those nightmares that had haunted her over the years had been visions. Prophecies bestowed upon her by the deadlights.

But they had stopped it and, by doing so, those fates had been altered and derailed. Stan had returned to them and she had been relived, ecstatic even, because it meant it was really over.

But that had been before she had found herself standing in the townhouse kitchen holding onto Richie as he brought doubt crashing back around her. The fear that, despite everything, they'd still find their way back to those inevitable ends. A temporary detour

but they'd reach those same destinations and suddenly the only one that seemed safe was Stan.

They had ended up comparing notes on what they had seen that night and Bev glanced down at that list now as she stood in one of Ben's penthouses in New York waiting to go get the last of her important things from her old home. She felt her heart flutter at the sight of Tom's name written on the sheet under how they'd both seen her die. She'd done her best not to think about having to face Tom again over the last few months. He had been furious when she'd sent him the papers for the divorce, had left more than a few messages telling her she was going to regret the choice. He had done what he always had; switched between violent threats and sad, hysterical apologies.

"Can't convince you to just leave everything there and not do this, huh?" Bev startled at the sound of Richie's voice behind her as she was pulled out of memories of too many carefully hidden bruises. She picked up the list and folded it back up, tried to put it aside in the back of her mind just as she tucked it into the back of her purse before turning to give Richie a look.

"I'm already leaving pretty much everything behind as it is. This will be quick, in and out, just to grab the essentials that I need. Passport, social security, some of the paperwork for the business. Things I'm going to need. Tom's agreed not to be there so it should be fine." She knew that wasn't necessarily the case even as she said it. Knew that Tom could promise a lot of things and have no intention on keeping them. "Ben will be with me."

"So will the rest of us."

"Richie." Bev sighed as she shook her head. They were going to have each other's backs but they couldn't move in a gang everywhere they went for the rest of their lives.

"Yeah, saying my name with irritation won't help with this. The others all agree and I don't think any of us are going to budge. Look, it's not that we don't think you can handle yourself, Bev, I'm pretty certain you could kick my ass if you wanted to. But we're not going to let you walk in there without us actively being present.

We're annoying like that."

Bev gave a soft laugh as she stopped to stand beside him. She knew the others would be downstairs waiting. They hadn't even talked to them about their fears on the deadlights and not a single one of them had been okay with the thought of her coming back here on her own. She could see it in Richie's eyes though, that defiant fear of knowing.

Knowing was a fucking bitch. That was probably closer to the truth.

"We're not going to be able to do this for everyone. We can't pin down exactly when we'll each be in danger to try and have the whole gang there to handle it." Bev crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself in an attempt to find comfort.

"Yeah, well, we can do it for you so there's no reason not to so you might as well accept it, Bev. We're here; let us help." She eyed him for a moment as Richie busied himself by listing up and looking at a frame that sat on Ben's dresser. An old photo; Ben looking young as he stood with his parents.

"Fine but I expect you all to be on your best behavior." Bev leaned and pressed a kiss against Richie's cheek and he gave her a tight smile.

"That's a tall order for this group, Molly Ringwald. Losers club isn't known for our discretion." Richie took a deep sigh and put his arm around her shoulders as he turned to walk along with her out of the room. "Honestly, I'm just curious to see what sort of hoity toity place you'd been living. I mean, apparently Ben's been living his best fit life in this glass penthouse. I need to know just how short the short end of the stick I drew is."

"Yeah, I mean, I wasn't going to say anything but stand-up comedian, Rich? Really? Who thinks you're funny?" Bev slipped her arms around his waist in return as they moved down the hall towards the stairs. She could hear the rest of the Losers talking down in the living room joking. Eddie's laugh was followed by a half-hearted '*fuck you*' from Stan though she missed what Eds had said.

“Hey, that’s why other people write my jokes. I’m just the conduit for other people’s humor.”

Bev saw the look on Richie’s face at the sound of Eddie’s laugh from downstairs. Saw that momentary fondness that she knew Richie reserved specifically for him. It made her feel a bittersweet twinge for him as she leaned her head on his shoulder. She knew that they’d been talking around the subject of their feelings but the second of melancholy on Richie’s face that followed that adoration made it clear they hadn’t confronted it directly yet.

“Are you going to try and start writing your own material again?” Bev asked as they started down the stairs at a slow pace, drawing out their chance to talk.

“Going to try but, like I said, a conduit for others. I’d like to think I still know how to be funny. What about you? Starting up a new fashion business since you decided to let the asshole buy control of your current line?” Bev gave a sigh as the mention of her business that would now be Tom’s. Not that he’d be able to keep it afloat. She’d been the driving force behind her fashion line and without her he’d be left floundering.

Bev caught sight of Ben when they were close to halfway down the stairs to where the group was visible. Felt the smile come to her lips and some of that sense of loss get chased away with a renewed appreciation for what she’d gained in return.

“I might. Maybe trying something a bit different. More comfort wear than high fashion.” She gave a soft shrug as she lifted her head from Richie’s shoulder. He gave a soft noise of amusement though she knew his attention was focused on Eddie just like her focus was on Ben.

“You’ll always be high fashion to me, baby.”

*

Bev had managed to avoid feeling nervous until they actually pulled up to the house. It hit her then and she toyed with the sleeves of her jacket as she did a quick scan to see if Tom’s car was

somewhere in sight. There was no sign of it though and she hoped that meant he had actually followed through with his promise not to be there. It would be a blessing on several levels; she wouldn't end up having to face him ever again and it would be a sign that all their worrying was for naught.

The predictions of the deadlights weren't going to haunt them still.

"Let me go first. If he's there it might be better if we just go without a confrontation." Bev hated this feeling. Hated the sense of being scared and vulnerable and weak; that part of her still tried to tell her she needed to just *do what Tom says.* Stay safe. Behave. Do what he wants and you won't get beat tonight.

She hated it as well because she knew that IT had done that to her. She had found her strength to break away from her father's abuse only to have all recollection of the strength washed away. She had found herself falling back into those habits and it had happened so insidiously.

Tom had seemed wonderful at first. Loving and caring and gentle. Then he'd started to guilt her over time spent with friends. Questioned her relationships with any man that came within her radius.

That had been followed by the demands. Requests at first. Acted like they were optional until he'd tried to break her nose over a cigarette. She had apologized to him and he'd looked at her with pleading eyes to ask her to never make him do that again.

Bev shivered a little with the memory of it but also found a fire igniting inside. Anger. Rage. Defiance against everything he had ever tried to push upon her.

"We'll follow your lead, Bev, but remember that you don't have to do this alone." Ben spoke up in the driver's seat beside her. The others were in the rental car behind them; an SUV that Eddie had insisted had the best safety features but also managed to look like a surveillance vehicle. Bev wasn't entirely convinced that hadn't been a part of the selling point for him given what they were here to

do.

"I know." Bev reached to take Ben's hand and give it a gentle squeeze. That was one thing she understood and appreciated beyond belief despite the hesitancy about putting the others in Tom's path. She knew that they had her back no matter what and that she didn't have to do it on her own. She felt that swell of adoration as if it was fresh and new as Ben gave her a soft smile and lifted her hand up to press a kiss to her knuckles.

Bev knew that with Ben she'd never have to fear again. All there would be is love.

"I think we should probably get going before that lot decides to charge in on their own." Ben glanced towards the rear-view mirror and Bev peered back towards the SUV that was parked behind them and saw the rest of the Losers filing out. Stan was standing on the edge of the sidewalk looking up towards her house with a small frown of concern. Not for the first time, Bev wondered if he hadn't peeked the deadlights himself when It had tried to take a bite out of him as a kid.

"I'm pretty sure Bill's willing and ready to just bust down the door," Bev sighed though she smiled as she pulled her hand back from Ben so she could unbuckle. Ben followed her lead as he'd said he would though she heard his soft huff of laughter. Despite being such a gentle soul, Bill seemed constantly at the ready to bust down a few doors.

"You want us to go in first, Bev?" Stan asked her, gentle and a bit nervous sounding as Bev and Ben walked to join the others on the sidewalk. "If he is here, it might deter him if he sees us all first."

"No, honestly it will probably piss him off more. I don't see his car so he may actually have stood by his word. If he is there though, it will be better if I go in first. You all just follow close behind." Bev offered Stan her hand, felt a small spike of sadness when she saw the hint of the scar on his wrist that was still looked fresh as it healed. He linked fingers with her as Ben came to stand beside her as they all gathered in a small semi-circle to look up at the place that she'd called home for so many years.

“I mean, we could shove Eddie in there first. We know that he can take a lickin’ and keep on tickin’.” Richie gave Eddie a gentle shove with his shoulder and a grin only to earn himself a single-fingered salute in return. Stan shared a look with her for a second, rolled his eyes in that sense of being forever over their insistent flirting, and Bev gave a soft laugh before starting towards the door.

She glanced towards the banister of the stone stairs as she walked up them to see if her ring still sat where she’d left it. Either Tom had found it or it had been washed away in the rain though as the banister was empty. She fished her key out of her pocket, another thing she’d be leaving behind once she was done here, and stepped up to the door.

Bev looked back and found them all there. Her Losers. Her hand didn’t shake when she unlocked the door and she stepped into the foray of her old life. The house was dark, lights off and quiet around her as she stepped inside. She reached, fumbling for a second to find the switch to turn on the lights. The stairway foray lit up, the painting looking down at her and feeling haunted with that tension she’d known had been her life with Tom.

She stepped further inside, listening to see if there was any sign of Tom and as she reached the bottom step, he made himself known from the dark doorway of the kitchen.

“Didn’t think you’d actually be dumb enough to come ba-“

“Wow, that is…a horrible fucking painting. I thought you were supposed to have taste, Bev.” Richie interrupted Tom as he stepped up besides him and if it wasn’t for that panicked cloying fear that had risen up at the sight of her soon-to-be ex-husband she would have laughed at the expression on Tom’s face.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Hi, I’m Richie. But like, really, that? It’s like walking in to find a Caravaggio where the eyes follow you and an extra dose of that “asshole” aesthetic.” Richie briefly offered Tom his hand though he pulled it back when Tom didn’t reach for it. Bev saw the other Losers quietly filing in behind the two of them unnoticed.

“Is this the fucking loser you’re leaving me for, Bev?” She could tell Tom was working up to trying to start something. To take a swing or get the belt. Normally, her stomach would be in her throat but it was hard to feel scared of him with the other Losers all gathered behind him looking about ready to start another rock fight.

“Me? God no, I’m gay. He’s the one she’s leaving you for.” Richie nodded his head towards Ben who was standing behind Tom and Bev watched him turn around clearly expecting to confront him. Bev did laugh when Tom clocked how much taller than him Ben was. She did laugh at the expression on his face as he realized that the other four were back there too.

“We should go get your stuff, Bev.” Stan shifted to step around Tom to join her on the stairs and it was like the tension left the room. Mike and Bill stepped up beside Ben, made it clear to Tom that they weren’t going to let him follow her upstairs. Three of the gentlest guys she knew and she had no doubt each of them would be willing to throw punches if Tom tried anything.

“Come on, smart ass.” Eddie smacked Richie on the shoulder as he passed him, signaling that he should come with them as well to help gather her things. Richie watched him for a second before giving a soft sigh and starting up after them. Bev linked arms with him as they started up the stairs and she pointed them in the direction of the office.

The four of them stayed quiet on the way to the office, some sense that there was still at least some need for concern. The second they were through the door though they stood there for a second looking around the overly tidy space where Tom had once locked up her check books and pieces of identification as a method of control and Bev gave a soft snort of laughter.

“Did you see his face when he turned around and saw Ben? Cause that was pretty fucking great.” Richie joined her, the two of them collapsing together into laughter that was half relief because they knew. They knew that if Bev had been there on her own that it wouldn’t have ended with Tom looking startled with the realization that he wasn’t going to bully his way through to her.

“That painting was much more gothic horror, Tozier. Do you know the combination to the safe, Bev?” Stan shook his head lightly at the two of them but there was a smile on his lips as he moved over to the desk. The safe was tucked back behind it and Bev pulled away from Richie as she fought to chase off that hysterical laughter for a second. Stan sat in Tom’s chair as he pulled his glasses out to put them on and squint at the combination key pad.

“If he hasn’t changed it than it’s the last five of his cell number. Two-three-five-four-two. To think he thought I didn’t actually know that was the combination.” Stan gave a soft chuckle as he entered the numbers in. There was the sound of Richie and Eddie bickering quietly in the background and Bev glanced back at them.

“What the fuck do you even know about Caravaggio? You’re lucky he didn’t just pop you in the face, you idiot.”

“Forgive me for having an interest in art history. And, he could have gone right on ahead and tried to pop one. I mean, I literally took Bowers out with an axe, I’m sure I could have knocked him back.”

“Those two need to get a fucking room.” The comment from Stan caught her off guard and she laughed calling attention to them as Stan got the safe door open. Apparently, Tom hadn’t seen the point of changing the code. “So, you’ll definitely want any forms of identification. I would also recommend any of the tax information from the business. At least some copies in case you’re ever audited for past years even if you’ve removed yourself from the company. I can do a quick leaf through everything, make sure there’s nothing that you might need. It doesn’t actually look like he has much in here.”

“You’re a saint, Stan.” Bev pressed a kiss to the top of Stanley’s head as he reached to dig through the papers inside the safe. He was able to quickly uncover where Tom had her stack of identification and documents stowed away and pulled them out to set them aside. “The absolute best.”

“You all keep saying that and I might just start believing it,” Stan said softly with a slight shrug. Bev gave him a light squeeze,

tried to impress upon him that they truly meant it. Stan had always looked out for them; thinking they had lost him had been like think they'd all lost a piece of themselves. Bev was positive she wasn't the only one who wanted him to understand how important he was.

"Bev!" Tom's voice came from out near the stairs somewhere with the sound of raised voices and she froze in place. Stan shifted away from the safe, hands carefully tucking her back closer to it as he rolled the chair between her and the door before standing. Eddie and Richie both had shifted too, Richie moving to push himself in the front with the determination of someone who knew he wasn't in danger.

Bev wasn't as certain on that as he seemed to be. Just because this wasn't the scenario that they'd seen for him didn't mean things could change. The thought sent some of the fear in her throat once more as she heard the argument continue downstairs, Tom screaming her name once more before there was the sound of a crash and a round of loud curses. Footsteps came barreling up from below at a rushed pace and Bev knew that it was Tom. That he'd gotten ahead of the others and was coming to find her.

There was a long tense moment as they stood at the ready; Eddie gripping the back of Richie's shirt. All three of them stayed between her and the door, her knights in flannel and khaki. They heard footsteps approaching and Eddie tugged Richie back a step or two as they waited for Tom to barge in.

The door swung open and Mike appeared. He stopped short just inside when he saw them all lined up staring at him in anticipation. Bev breathed a sigh of relief that came out almost in sync with the others.

"Jesus, Mike…what the hell happened?"

"Guy thought it would be a good idea to try and get past us. Took a few swings at us with an umbrella before Ben laid him out. The other two are watching him but we probably don't have long if we want to avoid problems."

"Well, shit…Guess we take what we have and go?" Richie

glanced back at her with a look that somehow managed to be both an apology and an 'I told you so'. Bev rolled her eyes as she stepped out of the way of Stan as he carefully reached around her to grab the stack they'd already collected from the safe.

"What? No, we're here to get Bev's shit, we're getting her shit. We should have a bit of time, if Ben laid him out then he'll be down for at least...ten minutes. Won't be long but if there's anything major, there should be time. Stan, you keep looking for anything that might be important to have. Bev, is there anything you want to grab somewhere else in the house?" Eddie shook his head, giving Richie a light shove that earned him an offended look.

"Since the fuck when are you Mr. Take Charge?"

"Risk Management, asshole." Eddie brushed off Richie's question though Bev could see the nerves in his face. She knew he didn't like the idea of them staying there any longer but he wanted to make sure she had anything she needed or wanted from the house.

"I have a keepsake box in the bedroom I'd like to grab."

"I can go with Bev. You two help Stan and we all meet downstairs in about five?" Mike asked expectantly as he offered a hand out towards her.

"Yeah, great. No more than five. Come on and be useful asshole." Eddie nodded as he tugged Richie over towards the desk. Bev stepped around them to take Mike's hand as they stepped back out into the hall. She took a moment to look over the banister down into the foray as they passed and spotted Ben looking up at her. Bill was crouched down next to Tom who was, indeed, laid out flat on the floor near the bottom of the stairs.

She took the lead then, pulled Mike along with her towards the bedroom. Bev had to pause for a moment when she stepped inside. The room was a mess; Tom had been busy while she was gone and her clothes were scattered around and torn into shreds. Where the rest of the house had seemed the same as it had been before she left for Derry, here there was destruction scattered about. It didn't escape her that this would be the room where most of her things

resided. Tom wouldn't have damaged the rest of the house because it was a testament to him. The bedroom, especially her closet, was 'her' space though. One of the few places she was able to choose some of the actual décor and it was those things that were her choices shredded upon the floor now.

If this had been before, Tom would have said he'd just lost control. Hadn't been able to help himself because she had just made him so mad. It didn't escape her now that if he ever had truly been as out of control as he said it wouldn't have only been her things that got broken. Wouldn't have only been her who had suffered lashes and bruises.

"You okay, Bev?" Mike stood at her side, rested his hand on her shoulder as she took it in and felt that anger rise up once more. It was tension and rage and a scream trying to climb up out of her throat.

"Yeah, I'm fine…" She managed not to yell it and shook herself out of the momentary shock as she moved to the closet.

Bev had always known anything important needed to be squirreled away; hidden where it couldn't be torn up or tossed out. She'd learned that with her father and she had found herself with the habit once she'd realized that Tom was the same.

Mike stayed close behind her as she stepped through the wreckage of clothes and shoes scattered across the floor. Everything was hers, Tom's clothes still sat perfectly hung and untouched in his half of the space.

Anger. Clenched fists and teeth as she moved to the small set of drawers near the back. Opened the middle on up and then forced her nails between the false bottom and the side of the drawer to pull it up. Underneath was a small keepsake box. Little things that meant more to her than the business or the money. Some of the things she hadn't even remembered their importance but had known there was a reason she wanted to hold them close.

She cracked the box open to peek inside. A photo of her mother, the last that probably existed, dredged up a long time ago

from her father's things. Letters from friends in college and just beyond that she had long lost touch with or that Tom hadn't approved of. And a photograph of some old grade school friends who's names she hadn't remembered a few months ago and who were now standing behind her as she left another abusive relationship behind.

She put the lid back in place and hugged the box to her chest before turning to step back out of the closet. Mike stood in the doorway of it looking around at the careful and intentional destruction Tom had left behind with a concerned frown on his face.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah, this is it. There's nothing else here for me." Mike studied her for a moment before giving a soft nod of his head.

"Then let's get the others and get out of here."

They headed towards the stairs, reaching the top of them as Stan stepped out of the office with a bundle of papers under his arm looking exasperated as Eddie and Richie followed behind him. Tom was awake again though he wasn't on his feet just yet. He was eyeing Bill and Ben critically as they all started down the stairs together but the second that he saw her that anger sparked in his eyes once more.

Only Bev could see past it now. It wasn't anger that drove Tom. It was fear. Fear that he wouldn't be the one in control, fear that she wasn't going to bend to his will and come back. Fear that she'd clearly seen what he'd done and she wasn't breaking down in despair.

"I'm pressing charges, Bev! You bring your gang of thug boyfriends in to rough me up and steal what's mine! I'm going to ruin-"

"Shut the fuck up, Tom." Bev didn't even pause as she moved past him. Didn't give him the time, didn't give him the chance to think for even a moment that he mattered to her anymore.

Bev was free. She was safe both from Tom and the he was

supposed to bring to her that had seemed so inevitable in the deadlights.

When she stepped outside, the other Losers close behind her, it had started to rain. It was cool and cleansing as she left the key to the front door of her old life behind in the same place she'd left her ring.

3. Getting your ducks in a row

Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers come up with a plan once Richie and Bev talk with them about their concerns about the deadlight visions. Mike postpones his trip to Florida in flavor of sticking close to an old friend. Richie and Eddie try to define where they're at with each other as Eddie prepares to return to New York.

Bill winced as the bag of frozen peas pressed against his cheek where Tom had managed to land one decent hit before Ben had knocked him down. They were all back at Ben's place now, sitting in the living room spread out amongst the furniture. Bev and Richie had said they needed to talk but Bill hadn't expected it to go where it had. He glanced at Mike who sat down beside him, tried to get some gauge of what he thought of it all.

Bill still had to gauge his own thoughts on the situation; on what he'd been debating asking Mike about.

"So, you think the things you two saw in the deadlights might still come about unless we stop them?" Mike met his eyes as he spoke and Bill could see the worry even as he tried to keep his tone even. They had thought this was over but if Bev and Richie were right…

"We're not sure. It's a possibility and with what happened with Tom it might be better to be cautious." Bev gave a soft shrug as she leaned back against Ben's chest and looked to Richie who seemed far from happy being the focus of the attention for once. He gave one of those tight-lipped smiles that belied all of his anxiety and tension; it had been the same one he'd had while encouraging the rest of them to come along to get Bev's things.

That hadn't taken much convincing; they had all seen the signs. None of them had felt comfortable taking that risk of her going without back up.

“I mean, it sure would suck if we all managed to make it out of clown town only to be taken out by things that two of us have gotten sneak peaks of.” Richie tried to break up some of the tension with a bit of humor but it fell flat in the center of their group.

Mike’s focused turned on Bill for a second, hand moving to carefully nudge the bag of peas back up in place on his swollen cheek. Bill hadn’t even realized he’d let his hand drop from his face, wondered briefly just how nasty it must look as he clocked the concern in Mike’s eyes. He searched his face for a second, tried to get a sense of just what he was thinking. The two of them, they’d been just about on the same page since Mike had called them all back to Derry.

Well, once Mike had told him the truth on everything.

“How are we going to stop it? We can’t be together all the time; we all have separate lives we’ve got to get back to eventually.” Eddie speaking up from where he paced the floor behind the couch pulled Bill’s focus away again. Mike dropped his eyes at the same moment as they turned to look back at the group. Eddie was giving Richie worried glances behind his back. If he was attempting to be inconspicuous about it, he was failing. The two of them had hardly been able to keep their eyes off each other from the second they’d seen each other in Jade of the Orient.

“We’ll figure out a system. Go over what you two have seen, stay in contact and make sure we do what we can to avoid ending up in situations where we might wind up in trouble.” Bill spoke up in hopes of easing the nerves he could see in Eddie. Ease the nerves he knew that they were all feeling. The others looked to him expectantly, somehow he was always their unofficial leader. Stan gave him a small encouraging smile from where he was curled up in one of the over-sized chairs.

Bill hoped that the fact he’d managed to survive his suicide attempt meant that he’d already avoided his deadlights end. That he was safe and so was Bev now. Two down, five more to go. He wouldn’t know that for sure until they heard what Richie and Bev had both seen.

“Keeping in touch will be easy. Send an SOS if we end up feeling unsafe.” Stan offered the suggestion quietly, shifting to make room for Eddie who came to sit down on the arm of the chair a bit roughly.

“How do we know if we stop it from happening once that it won’t try and happen again?” Silence followed Eddie’s question as they all sat and let it sink in. Would they ever really be safe?

“It’s not here anymore to try and manipulate new situations?” Ben’s suggestion felt more like an attempt to ease their minds but there was a chance he was right. Especially if Bev and Richie had both seem similar ends for them despite being caught in the deadlights almost three decades apart. It would make sense, It clearly had some influence before but now…now it was gone.

“That tracks. And really, it’s probably the best we can aim for right now.” Mike spoke with more certainty than he likely felt and Bill patted his knee before standing up to head into the kitchen. His cheek was numb enough as it was and they’d need something to be able to go over the visions.

“So, let’s go over it all. Make s-sure we know what to look out for. Go from there.” He moved to the freezer, mentally cursed the fact that his stutter always made it clear when he was feeling nervous or scared. He did his best to maintain a calm exterior despite it as he found the note pad he’d seen on the counter earlier. Ben’s grocery list was scribbled down on the top sheet and he carefully removed it to leave on the fridge before bringing the pad with him back to the living room.

“Alright, yeah, great. Amazing. So, tell us how we’re supposed to die.” Eddie’s voice was somewhere between nervous sarcasm and honest willingness to solve this as he shifted from the arm of the chair to giving Richie a shove to sit down beside him on the couch instead. Bill caught the roll of Stan’s eyes as he did this and surprised a bit of a smile. Some things never really changed.

“Right, yeah. Let’s rehash that trauma so we can all share it,” Richie muttered under his breath with a heavy lack of enthusiasm. Still, they all scooted a little closer together as he set the

notepad down on the coffee table between them.

The Losers were planning on saving each other once more.

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Mike wasn't certain he liked knowing how he was supposed to die. He liked even less knowing, not just one, but two different versions of how all his friends were meant to die. Bev and Richie's visions had been just different enough, the circumstances altered just enough, but It still had devised the same ends for them all.

For Mike, it would be an accident. In Bev's, it had happened while he was fleeing from It when the others hadn't made it back to help him. He'd crashed after seeing the mimics of his dead friends standing in the road. That was the version that likely wouldn't be happening now but that wasn't much comfort considering, in Richie's vision, those visions weren't what caused the accident. He was still supposed to die trapped and alone with no one to realize until it was too late. No one would be there to get him out this time.

The visions for the others were just as disheartening and concerning. They'd spent some time going over each of them, comparing to try and figure out where the differences had been made. It had left them all feeling discouraged and more than a little disturbed by the time they'd finished and dispersed throughout Ben's place to try and get some rest.

There was a plan now in place but still no real way to be certain just when or if the deadlights visions would find them for sure. Mike hoped that at least knowing the *how* would be enough.

He sighed as he leaned back into the couch in the dim lit living room; Ben's expansive windows looking out over a dark stretch of land below that valleyed out with the lights of the city. He had the list on the coffee table in front of him; Richie's scribbles besides Bev's neater print as they had broken down the difference in their visions. That had at least settled one thing in Mike's mind; he was fairly confident that It had to have been manipulating things. The changes in the visions seemed tied to the fact that they'd all come together to defeat It. One last ditch effort on Its part to ensure a victory against

them in the end.

They weren't going to let that happen though. Mike wouldn't let that happen; not after being wrong about the Ritual of Chüd. Not after almost getting them all killed for no reason once already.

Mike sighed as he pushed the list across the table as he took a sip of the whiskey Ben had gotten him before heading up for bed. The others were likely all asleep too, spread out in the extra rooms until they'd start parting ways at last. Mike didn't know exactly where he was going to go. He wanted to stay out of Derry now that he had the actual opportunity for it.

"Can't sleep?" Mike glanced back as he heard Bill's voice come from the office behind him where he'd been camped out on the floor.

"Nah, not really. Too much on my mind." Mike shifted to make room for Bill to sit down beside him on the couch. He was tired but there was too much on his mind to be able to just turn it off. "Thought we were free of It."

"Ha, yeah. Me too. We'll manage this though, Mikey. Like we've handled everything else." Bill gently took his glass of whiskey from him to take a sip, propping his feet up on the coffee table. "We have a plan at least."

"Yeah…not much of one." Mike shifted to match Bill's posture, propped his socked feet up on the table beside his as Bill handed him the glass back. The ice had melted some, had watered down the whiskey but honestly that was just fine.

"You have a plan for where you're going to go? I know you were thinking Florida but…"

"But?" Mike gave Bill a questioning look. There was a lot of unsaid things hanging on the end of that sentence. Seeing each other had brought up a lot of things that Mike hadn't even realized was missing. Bill had always been a guide for knowing how to handle things; had been since their friendship had started in a joint attempt

to survive childhood. It had felt a lot like coming home even with Mike being the only one who had never left.

He knew they weren't the only ones trying to figure out how to work with that wave of reemerging feelings and memories.

"I'd li-like you to m-meet Audra." Bill pursed his lips as he looked at him, the nerves apparently even without his old stutter slipping into place momentarily. Mike tried to read just what he meant by that. Just what exactly the deal was here because Bill didn't typically get nervous with him. He caught Bill's eyes glance towards the slip of paper on the far side of the table.

"It'd be nice to meet her, Bill, but I don't think she's gonna put up with me becoming a third wheel friend just so I'm not on my own." Mike kept his tone light and joking as he raised a brow at Bill. A soft flush rose in Bill's face at the comment and Mike narrowed his eyes just a bit in an attempt to read if there was anything else in the suggestion. This wasn't the first time that Bill had tried to convince Mike to come with him.

When they'd all been graduating high school, Bill had tried to convince him to head off to college with him. That they could room together while Bill studied English and Mike could start on his history degree. Mike hadn't been able to bring himself to leave though; not like the rest of them had. He hadn't been able to shake that feeling It was going to come back and he'd been right.

Mike just hadn't expected them all to forget him.

"She'd like you…and it could be for a little while or a l-l-long time. We're…uh, we're open to having others around." Bill winced a little as he fought to get his words out and snagged the glass back from him for a moment to take another drink. Mike studied him for a long second as he let the suggestion and all it seemed to speak to sink in. "I-I get it if you don't…you've gotta live your life, yeah? I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, no I'm glad you did." Mike glanced at that damned list, knew that Bill's name was on the top of it. The thought of not being there when he needed help…that sense of loss settled in his chest all

over again. “I don’t really know where else I’d go but I don’t want to go back to Derry, that’s for sure. I can come stay for a while, move on when I’ve worn out my welcome.” Mike patted Bill’s knee, let his hand linger for just a second before resting his arm over the back of the couch behind them.

Aside from doing school, getting his degrees and the work he’d done focused on Derry’s history while running the library, Mike hadn’t really given a lot of thought to what he wanted from life. It had always been about making sure that It didn’t manage to come back. He’d thought Florida would be it but sitting there now with Bill, even if that threat of it not being over wasn’t looming over them, Mike couldn’t find a reason to say no. Maybe it would be a week or two; maybe it’d be longer.

“Hell, maybe you can h-help me figure out how to write a good ending while you’re with us.” Bill sounded a little more at ease as he made the joke and Mike shook his head as he gave a soft laugh.

“I’m not sure you want to hear my opinion on your endings. We can leave that to Audra.”

“Oh, you two can apparently commiserate over it. Audra hates them too. I think everyone does.” There was a bit of relief in Bill’s voice that was mirrored in the shy sort of smile he gave Mike just then. Mike let his hand sit between them, palm up in invitation to see if Bill would take it. He didn’t have to wait long before their fingers linked together between them.

“Well, you’ll land on a good one eventually, I’m sure.” Mike gave Bill’s hand a soft squeeze and laid his head back against the cushions of the couch to close his eyes. He felt Bill’s head come to rest on his shoulder as they sat in the momentary silence. Ben’s place was quiet around them, the other all fast asleep or at least managing an approximation of it by now.

“What do you think about the plan? The SOS texts? Trying to stay out of situations that might lead up to the visions?” Bill spoke quietly this time as if he was worried about breaking the peace that had settled over them. Mike creased his brow as he thought about it. It had been the best they could think of given they had no timeline.

They weren't even certain it was all going to happen.

"I think we're aware that we need to be careful. That we at least know what to watch for." Mike turned his head, let his cheek rest on the top of Bill's head and found comfort in his closeness. In not being left behind anymore. "I think that might be the best we can ask for. In the meantime, we've at least got each other."

*

"You're not going back there."

Eddie sighed as Richie flopped down on the bed beside his bag with purposeful force to dislodge some of his things that he'd laid out neatly on top of the sheets. He gave him a glare as he tried to gather them back up. Richie stretched, spread himself out to purposefully knock more things aside. He was like a fucking cat.

"I'm not going back, Richie. Not to Myra. I've got to go though to get things sorted out. File for divorce and, you know, return to fucking work cause not all of us have the luxury of working a job where we set our own hours. I'm probably going to be lucky if I even still have a job." Eddie snatched back up his toiletries that were at risk of falling between the floor and the bed.

"You know you don't have to worry about that." Richie spoke quietly as he reached the snag Eddie's aftershave away from him before he could pick it up. Eddie gave a frustrated sigh as he stopped to give Richie another look. He knew what Richie was suggesting.

They hadn't talked about it; not directly. This thing between the two of them. Talking about it head on felt like a lot still and now that he knew that Richie had been keeping his concerns about the deadlights visions to himself it felt even harder.

"Do I know that, Rich?" Eddie snatched the aftershave back from as Richie gave him a roll his eyes like that was supposed to answer the question. "If you want to say something, Richie, you've got to actually say it."

Eddie felt a small spike of emotion that was somewhere between fear and excitement as he shoved the aftershave into his bag. There was a moment of silence that felt like a lifetime. Eddie immediately wanted to take it back, to tell Richie to forget about it and that he shouldn't be pushing for them to actually confront this. He knew. He knew how Richie felt even if they hadn't really said it. Just like he knew that Richie's concern was founded in his own fear of somehow losing Eddie again.

He hadn't realized he'd stopped packing, hand still shoved in the bag where he'd dropped the aftershave, until he felt Richie's hand on his wrist. Eddie blinked as he realized that at some point Richie had sat up, was looking at him entirely too quietly.

Look what you've done, Eddie, you've made a fool of yourself.

Eddie never had been able to fully shake free from that voice in the back of his head that more often than not sounded like his mother. Reminded him of his limitations and failings. Richie gently pulled him a little closer and Eddie shut his eyes for a moment to try and shut those doubts out as he let him. He felt Richie's hands come to rest on his waist lightly, almost timidly, and Eddie opened his eyes to look down at him.

Those doubts were pushed away with the expression on Richie's face. Eddie felt a little short of breath at the sight of it, that unguarded look of adoration.

"I could go with you. I don't want you to be on your own. I want to make sure you're safe because…well, because…" Richie stumbled a little over his words and he tugged Eddie even closer to bury his face against his stomach. Eddie flushed softly, rested his hands in Richie's hair as he scrubbed his fingertips against his scalp. The intimacy, familiar but new all at the same time, another thing that helped quiet the doubts in his mind even as Richie struggled to say what he meant.

"I love you. I'm in love with you which is a whole hell of a lot to say just like that. But I think at this point maybe it's a good thing to say since I'm basically making out with your abs at the moment. How the fuck do you have these abs? Hey…where are you

going…”

Eddie had pulled back from Richie to start packing again. He shouldn’t have put the aftershave into his bag without it being sealed inside a plastic bag. It would leak and get all over his clothes and he’d end up with all his things smelling like he’d taken a bath in the stuff. Richie’s hands stayed on his waist but he didn’t stop Eddie from moving to pack, just followed along with him.

“I need to finish getting packed if we’re going to catch a flight. Especially since we’ll have to book another seat on the plane. Actually, you should probably do that online. The flight might be booked up.”

“So…I’m going with you then?” Richie gave him a bit of a confused frown as he let his hands fall away from Eddie’s waist.

“You said you wanted to come with me. There’s ground rules though.” Eddie gave Richie a pointed look and saw the mischievous look on his face in response.

“Ground rules? Really?”

“Yeah, cause we’re not doing this. Not until things are squared away with Myra. I can’t be that person. I won’t.” Eddie shook out one of the plastic bags and started carefully loading his toiletries into in where they’d be safely contained. He heard Richie’s laughter start and just shook his head; understood that it probably sounded ridiculous but he was sticking with it. He wanted to be with Richie but he wanted to do this right. He wanted to do something right.

“What exactly would we be doing, Eds? What sort of improper things would we be getting up to?” Richie laid back on the bed, his weight causing more of Eddie’s stuff to shift out of order all over again. Eddie felt that blush again as Richie waggled his eyebrows at him and just flipped him off in response.

“I mean, I can’t imagine what you think we’d be doing that would cause problems with your ex-mom.”

“Fuck you-

“You haven’t even acknowledged the fact that I said I’m in love with you so clearly-“

“I said you could come with me-“

“I didn’t realize that was a reciprocate to ‘I love you’. Unless I’m supposed to just be your side dish until you find someone you *actually* love?”

“You’re more like a case of food poisoning.”

“You’d have to eat me to actually get food poisoning, Eddie Spaghetti.”

“God, can you two get a room. Honestly.” Eddie stopped to look back at the other spare bed where Stan was lying down with his headphones in. He had pulled the headphones out to look at the two of them with an expression of pure irritation.

“We’re in a room, Stan. In fact, one would even call it ‘our room’.” Richie spoke up from where he was lying on the bed and Stan rolled his eyes at the two of them. “You know, Stanley, if you’re going to continue your sabbatical you could always be chaperone. Make sure I don’t damage our poor dear Eddie’s reputation with scandalous behavior?”

“And listen to the two of you grossly flirt for entire spans of time? I think I’ll pass. And I definitely won’t be submitting Patty to you two. Bev and Ben are the two normal ones I think she’ll be able to handle.” Stan got up from the bed and came over to them, snagging some of Eddie’s things out from underneath Richie to hand to him.

“Despite the fact that you specifically just said I wasn’t ‘normal’, thank you,” Eddie said with a slight glare as he took the offered stack of shirts. Stan gave him a small smirk as he bumped shoulders with him and nodded towards Richie like he was trying to tell him something. Eddie gave him a confused look as he started on refolding the shirts that Richie had wrinkled as Stan gave him another slow nod.

Eddie looked at Richie who had picked up a bottle of facial toner he hadn't gotten put away yet. He was squinting at it as he read the back of it, seemed to be distracting himself with it. Eddie recognized the look on his face, it was that tense falsely relaxed expression that had replaced that open adoration from earlier. When Eddie looked back to Stanley, he got a small shrug and a pat on the shoulder.

"Granted, Patty's always wanted to see New York. Maybe if we can swing a little more time away, we can come and see you two." Stan had turned to walk out of the room, to leave the two of them alone with one last pointed look at Eddie as he went.

Eddie frowned as he focused very specifically on the shirt he was folding; felt that nervous flutter in his gut as Richie called after Stan that maybe they didn't want them to visit now. He knew what Stan was trying to get at, that maybe it wasn't entirely a joke that Richie had called him on not saying anything back in regards to his confession of love.

"I don't know why you use all this shit, Eds, it does nothing for your complexion," Richie said as he tossed the bottle aside and gave him a tight smile.

"You know, don't you?" Eddie winced as it came out in a tumble of nerves. It wasn't fair to have expected him to say it and then be avoiding it himself. It felt big though, a promise of things that would have been easier if they didn't have potential doom still hovering around them. Saying 'I love you' to Myra had always been performative, expected and demanded. It was easier somehow when he hadn't really meant it. Not the way he meant it now. Not the way he meant it with Richie.

"What? That you use it to…'clear leftover impurities, leaving your skin silky soft and prepped for products'?" Richie picked the bottle back up specifically to read the back with a dramatic flare and Eddie reached across him to snatch it away from him. Richie pulled it away, stretched his arm over his head to keep it out of Eddie's reach without him practically having to crawl on top of him. Eddie made a frustrated face as he tried for the bottle, had to keep himself from falling over when Richie shifted unexpectedly beneath

him to try and wriggle further out of reach.

"No, I mean, yeah it does that. That's the point of toner, asshole. You know I love you too, right?" Distracted as he was, the words slipped out with a lot more ease than he'd thought they would. The fight dropped out of Richie as if he'd kneed him in the gut (or maybe Eddie had actually kneed him in the gut on accident). Either way, he snatched the toner away and pulled himself back to stand up triumphantly.

"Shit, Eds, you can't just spring the big 'I love you' on a guy like that," Richie said in a tone of voice that Eddie didn't recognize as he put the toner into the plastic bag with his other toiletries. He looked at Richie and immediately felt self-conscious again as he saw the expression of adoration had returned.

"You did it first, asshole, I was just making sure you knew it was…reciprocated." Eddie focused back on packing, gave up for the moment on making it perfect so that he could just get it done instead. They really would need to make sure that Richie was able to get on the flight if he was coming with him instead of heading home to California.

"You're going to wrinkle your shirts there, Eds." Richie sat up as if it took him a lot of effort and Eddie just shook his head. Kept shoving his things into his bag just to have something to do. "Eddie Spaghetti."

Richie's hands got in his way again, pushed the bag aside and gently took his wrists to stop him from continuing to ruin everything he owned. He'd need to repack everything he'd just shoved in there. That or somehow settle his mind of the fact he'd be ironing everything out the second he got to…wherever he was going to stay since it wasn't going to be at home.

Eddie finally looked at Richie as he sat down beside him, felt Richie's arms wrap around him in what felt like an apology. He had nothing to apologize for.

"We take this at your pace, okay? You want us to just be friends until everything is settled then we're friends. We'll always be

friends, Spaghetti head."

Eddie let himself settle against Richie's side, let himself be held for the moment as he tried to get rid of those shaky nerves. The shortness of breath that he'd always been told was asthma but really was probably anxiety. He closed his eyes tightly, let his head rest on Richie's shoulder as he felt a whole lot of confusing emotions. Overwhelmingly, however, he felt safe.

"How about you sit for a bit and I'll get the rest of your things packed? We will want to make sure I can get on the flight with you. Granted, first class doesn't usually fill up. It will be a burden to be sitting up there on my own but that's my cross to bear. I'll be sure to wait for you when we land since I know coach always takes forever to clear out." Richie let go of him to stand and start grabbing the last of Eddie's things for him. Eddie watched with a small amount of awe as Richie actually pulled some of the mess back out of the bag to try and carefully fold and replace it.

"So, in this whole plan of yours you'll be in first class?"

"Yep."

"While I'm still stuck in coach?"

"Well, yeah Eddie. You already have your ticket. Unless you're asking me to upgrade it for you?" Richie gave him a wide-eyed look as he struggled to get a button up folded. Eddie rolled his eyes as he snagged one of his other shirts and carefully and slowly demonstrated *how* to properly fold them. Richie tried. It was better than it had been when he did his best to fold the next one for him.

"You know what, never mind. I don't think I'd want to spend an entire two-hour flight sitting beside you anyway, jackass." Eddie set his folded shirt into the bag and decided he wasn't going to help Richie with the rest as he let himself lie back on the bed this time.

"We'll make sure we sit together, Eds. Don't you worry." Richie said with a soft chuckle. Eddie watched him, took note of the care Richie was attempting to put into getting his things put away for

him even if he clearly never folded his own clothes. He could have just grabbed everything and shoved it into the bag, it's what Eddie had expected when he'd said he'd take over.

Richie finished getting the bag packed by placing the toiletry bag on top and managing to force it to zip closed. Eddie wouldn't have put his toiletries in with the clothes like that but he couldn't bring himself to complain as Richie moved the bag aside and came to sit back down beside him. When Richie laid back, Eddie found they were close enough he could easily see the freckles on Richie's face.

"So, New York?"

"Yeah, who knows. Maybe I'll be able to do a stint on SNL while I'm there. I'm sure my manager will be *thrill-*" Eddie felt the impulse to kiss Richie as he spoke and ended up following it. It went against what he had just said, that boundary that they had to wait, but the instinct had been a knot in his chest that felt like it was cutting off his air. Pressing his lips against Richie's was like the first gasping breath after you'd been under water for too long.

He heard Richie give a surprised hum, a pause before he leaned further into the kiss and Eddie felt his weight shift even closer. Eddie had always assumed people were exaggerating when they felt some sort of spark when they kissed. He had never felt a 'spark'; sure, he had enjoyed it some but it never seemed like anything special.

It was different with Richie, less a spark and more a bang as he felt his tongue momentarily tease along his lower lip. And then Richie was puling away, reluctantly but still untangling themselves from the kiss as he gave a soft shake of his head and Eddie felt he'd done something wrong.

"Sorry."

"No, you have…absolutely nothing to be sorry about with that one, Eds. Just…you said you wanted to wait. Until things were squared away. I want to make sure we don't do anything you'll regret or feel guilt over."

“Shit, I know…” Eddie groaned as he pressed his hands to his face, could already feel the dredges of guilt in the back of his mind. This was going to be difficult enough on Myra, that he was leaving…

Difficult enough she’ll try to poison you. The reminder of the conversation from the night before resurfaced in his mind. Richie had seen Myra try to drug him, not to necessarily kill him though that had been the result. But to make him sick. To make him stay. There was a fresh wave of worry that settled over him then as he peeked over at Richie who was giving him an amused look.

“Being with me might put you at more risk. It’s going to be a lot harder to hide…”

“Fuck hiding who I am, Eddie. I’m not going to let myself be scared back into the closet. Even if…this wasn’t a whole thing,” Richie motioned between them to make his point, “I don’t think I could just go back to the way things have been. I was miserable. If I tried to go back to that I’d continue to be miserable. Besides, I am going to be with you which is already different than what I saw. Death becomes me only when I’m on my own and I’m going to be with my knight in adorable armor instead.”

Richie spoke confidently but Eddie could still pick up on some of the nerves that he’d had last night. It had been clear how uncomfortable Richie had been talking about the deadlight’s visions, how nervous they made him. Eddie searched with his hand to find Richie’s where it was resting between them, linked their fingers together with a soft squeeze of reassurance.

They’d make this work. He’d keep Richie safe.

Richie believed in him and Eddie…he could be braver than he thought he was if it was for Richie.

4. Ice Cracked over a Pond

Summary for the Chapter:

> Stan and Patty come to visit Richie and Eddie in New York as winter sets in fully. Patty finds Stan's friends both surprising and endearing while continuing to worry about what happened several months ago. She knows Stan hasn't told her the truth but doesn't know how to approach it.
>
> Meanwhile, the Losers continue to have to sleep with one eye open waiting to see who might run into their deadlights ending next.

They had all gone on their own way after the incident with Bev's ex-husband. Stan had returned home. Returned to Patty who had greeted him in her loving way, worry still clear in her eyes and Stan had felt a bit guilty all over again. He hadn't wanted to scare her, to hurt her. He knew logically it would be a consequence but, well…

His job hadn't kept their promise to hold his job for him. They said he'd run out of time, had come up with all the reasons they could but he knew they just didn't want him back. They were worried he'd be a liability. He was a fucking accountant; not a doctor or a pilot or something like that. They had enough in savings to carry them over for a little while but not for long.

It freed them up though, for the winter break, to go and see Eddie and Richie in New York. Patty had been enamored with the thought of being in New York new the holidays. She was even more excited to meet his friends though Stan definitely had some reservations about her first introduction to the Losers being those two.

"This feels so glamorous, Stan." They'd arrived the night before and gotten settled into their hotel room only to immediately fall asleep. Now though, Patty was standing near the window looking out while wearing one of the plush robes that had been waiting for

them when they'd arrived. The room was thanks to Richie who had refused to let them make reservations somewhere cheaper that they could have covered on their own. It was also in the same building as where Eddie and Richie were staying while they worked on finalizing Eddie's divorce.

Stan was happy he hadn't argued with Richie about the place too hard now as he looked over at Patty standing at the window, looking down at the city streets as snow dusted the sidewalks below.

"When are we meeting with your friends?" Patty turned to face him, her eyes looking him over quickly with that small crease of a frown on her face though she turned it into a smile soon enough. Stan looked down at the paper cup he had in his hands filled with coffee from the machine in the room. His careful caring Patty was going to meet the two most vulgar friends he had. What had he been thinking? Granted, all the others would be a breath of fresh air in comparison.

"In a few hours. They were busy first thing this morning but we'll be able to head over around lunch. Did you want to go down and grab breakfast?" Patty moved over to him and Stan sat back in the chair so she could perch on his knee. She was gentle and lovely, like a bird; his dove.

"Oh, we probably should." She draped her arms gently over his shoulders and he smiled at her. Felt that same flutter of love he'd felt when they'd met in college. She gave him a small conspiratorial grin then, leaning in close as he took a sip of his coffee. "Do you think we could order room service?"

"I absolutely think we can order room service. We're in New York, why not live a little?" He gave her a wink as he saw her excited smile light up her face. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek before getting back up, moving to grab the room service menu from the table. Stan gave a soft sigh as he tugged at the sleeves of his sweatshirt he'd worn to bed. New York was a bit colder than Georgia. That and he hated the way people's eyes went to his wrists when the scars were visible. They'd fade eventually but they were still raw and red and obvious right now. The cold seemed to make them almost

more so.

"Do you know what you'd like? Maybe…oh, they have an eggs benedict?"

"I think that sounds wonderful, dove. Are you good ordering? I might take a quick shower." He saw a flicker of worry in her eyes. Felt that resurgence of guilt even as she did her best to chase that hint of fear away with another smile. He knew it would take time, time for her to trust and for them to be back to normal. She was scared for him because she didn't know, didn't realize that the entire reason he'd tried to kill himself was gone now.

Stan wanted to live. Wanted to live with Patty and wanted to be there to make sure his friends got the chance to live as well.

"Of course, Stanley."

*

"Stan the man!" Patty was a little startled as the door was opened for the two of them and Stan was immediately pulled into a hug by one of the men who looked vaguely familiar to her. She heard Stan's laugh, sudden and bright, and it made her heart sing.

"Jesus, Richie, let the poor guy breath." The shorter man inside, Eddie by the sounds of it, gave Richie a light smack. Despite his words though, the second Stan was let go, Eddie pulled him into a tight hug as well. Patty stood uncertain how to proceed but she gave Richie a smile as he looked at her.

"Hi, I'm-"

"Patty!" She was pulled into an all-encompassing hug by Richie and she felt a little overwhelmed as she realized why she recognized him. Stan had used to watch his comedy specials. She had hated them, got the sense Stanley hadn't exactly enjoyed them either yet he had almost religiously turned them on. It didn't make a great deal of sense to her that this was Richie Tozier, the comedian who constantly joked about what a nag his girlfriend was, when Stanley had informed her that the two men were together.

“Well, hello,” she said as she returned the embrace after her shock wore off. She felt Richie pull back and Stan was there, arm held out to her to tug her gently closer. He knew she’d feel overwhelmed and was quietly and casually getting her free.

“Patty, the over enthusiastic asshole is Richie and this is Eddie. Two of my best friends.” Patty felt another small surprise at the use of profanity. He rarely used it over the years and it had almost consistently been in frustration rather than this light joking tone he had now. “Guys, this is my wife, Patricia.”

“It’s wonderful to meet you both.”

“It’s great to meet you too, Patty. Stan’s told us a lot about you,” Eddie said as he knocked Richie’s hand away as it ruffled his hair. He gave him a small glare and Patty glanced between the two of them. “Sorry, we’re not ready to go just yet. This idiot can’t focus on a single thing at a time.”

“Forgive me for wanting to make sure that I actually have a show tomorrow night, Spaghetti head.” Richie prodded lightly at Eddie, not seeming to be able to keep his hands to himself. Patty glanced at Stan and he rolled his eyes a little at the two of them as they started to bicker lightly even as they moved out of the way to let them step inside. Stan gently guided her and they found themselves in a room that was even more extravagant than theirs had been.

Richie and Eddie had an actual suite, which made sense given they were living here until Eddie’s divorce was finalized, but she hadn’t expected it to feel so homey. There was a small living space with a kitchen and dining area off to one side. She could see to one side what must have been the bedroom though there were blankets piled up on the couch as well.

“It’s a mess but you know who’s fault that is. I feel like I live with a fucking disaster.” Eddie gave Richie a shove towards the bedroom, pointed at him with a stern look when he seemed like he was going to detour back towards the kitchen instead.

“It’s immersion therapy, Eds. You can’t be a bubble boy forever. A little dirt won’t hurt.” Patty pursed her lips in amusement

as Richie walked back towards the bedroom door. Eddie flipped him off and then seemed to come to the realization that Patty was there all over again as he gave her a sheepish look.

"Sorry, Pats."

"Oh, don't you fucking worry about it," Patty said with a soft giggle. Stan gave a snort of amusement along with her, sneaking a kiss to her cheek before he pulled away to look at the spread of papers across the dining table. He couldn't help himself, wanting to put things in order as he always did.

"I like her." Eddie said to Stan with a smile as he moved to grab his jacket from a closet tucked off to the side.

"I do too." Stan glanced up at her for a moment as he circled around to the other side of the table and they shared one of their secret looks. Patty loved when Stan gave her one of those looks; a slightly lopsided smile, gazing at him through his lashes with his curls falling over his forehead. It was one of the looks that had drawn her to him when they'd first met. Just a little bit dangerous like he knew something she didn't. It was only all the more alluring as time went on, all the better knowing how gentle of a soul Stanley really was. He'd never hurt her.

Well…almost never.

Patty's eyes unconsciously dropped down to Stan's wrists as he reached to pick up one of the pages on the table with a soft frown, his focus redirecting to whatever was on the paper. He had tried to leave her, which had hurt. The fact that she knew he hadn't told her the truth about why hurt as well. Patty hadn't wanted to bring it up, hadn't wanted to push, but she knew when Stan was lying to her. She knew when he wasn't telling her the whole truth and he was keeping something close to his chest about his suicide attempt and this reconnection with old friends.

"Is this some of the financials for the divorce? You know this says she's keeping most of your money, right?" Stan glanced up at Eddie with a look of concern. Picked up another page to scan over it with a deepening frown. Patty stepped aside a little, feigned some

interest in a photo the two had pinned up on the fridge. All seven of them were there; 'The Losers' as Stan said they called themselves. They were all sitting on the rocky side of a lake or quarry.

"Yeah, well…honestly, I'm just trying to make it as easy as possible. And besides, she doesn't work so it'd be that or pay alimony." Patty glanced back at Eddie as he spoke, felt a small swell of concern at the shift in his tone of voice. As she looked back at the photo, she met Stan's eyes for a second and saw that concern mirrored there. She didn't know all of the details but from what Stan had said Eddie's wife wasn't kind. She looked at that photo once more, saw the smile on Eddie's face as he sat tucked under Richie's arm. One of the others, maybe Ben from how Stan had described them each, had an arm around him as well.

That happiness that was so apparent even then when she knew that Eddie had been recovering from a major injury himself seemed almost an impossible expression on his face at the mention of his ex. It made her sad as she scanned the rest of the faces, all of them so happy together.

"Are you going to be alright with this? Especially with quitting your job?" Stan's voice dropped a little quieter as Eddie moved to stand with him. Their conversation grew a bit more hushed and Patty tried not to listen too intently. To let them have some privacy.

"Okay, so…that one there, the Columbian soccer player? That's Ben. The model besides him is Bev who, don't let looks deceive, she could kick all our asses." Patty blinked as Richie reached around her, pointing out people in the photo. She hadn't even realized he'd returned from the bedroom before now. "You know Stan, of course. These two are Bill and Mike. Bill's a terrible writer and Mike's a librarian. Clearly, a match made in heaven. Then there's the two handsome devils on the end. Well, I mean, there's Eddie at least. Can't say much about my looks."

"I think you both grew up to be very handsome," Patty said softly and watched with amusement as Richie gave an embarrassed sort of laugh. "I look forward to getting a chance to meet all of you. Having you back has made Stan very happy."

"We're happy to have him too."

"You two ready to go?" Eddie caught their attention before pushing a jacket into Richie's arms.

"Yeah, we were waiting on you two, Losers." Richie scoffed lightly, gave Patty a wink as he slid into his jacket and followed Eddie towards the door. Stan stepped up next to her, offered her his elbow as he looked quietly at the photo for a second. Patty smiled, felt a warmth in her cheeks as a pleasant blush rose to her face, and she linked their arms together.

"I'm probably going to take some time to help Eddie make a better financial plan after dinner. Are you okay hanging out for a while?"

"Of course," Patty said with a nod as they stepped out of the small kitchen area to meet the other two at the door of the suite.

"Hey, while you're doing that do you think that you could look at mine too? I have a feeling I'm going to be firing a certain agent of mine but it might help to know where I actually stand with things before I end up going solo again." Stan gave Richie a look as he held the door open for them expectantly and gave a wide cheesy smile.

"Rich…do you have any idea what your financial look like at all?"

"Eh, I've got money. I know that. Really that's about all I need to know." Richie gave a casual shrug as Patty glanced at Stan to see his deadpan look of annoyance. She could see the small smile tugging at his lips though, see the fondness and humor hidden behind his eyes. It had been so long since she'd seen him this happy.

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Dinner had been a longer affair than they'd planned; one that was full of laughter as Patty sat listening to the other three reminisce and bicker with a familiarity that didn't seem to match up with the fact that they'd not seen each other for almost thirty years.

Patty had observed them, let herself blend in a little to the background as she sipped at her wine. This was a side of Stan she hadn't really seen before; completely carefree, a bit rougher around the edges than he usually presented himself but absolutely a glow nonetheless.

It made Patty wonder even more what the real reason had been that he'd tried to steal himself away from the world. She wasn't blind to the fact that the first thing he'd done once he'd been released from the hospital was to go find these friends, the ones she'd only known about in odd conversations where Stan had seemed distant and it was as if they'd been talking about strangers.

Once they'd eaten, they had made their way back to the hotel, a place still lavish enough that it took her breath away slightly to see it. There they'd switched from wine to coffee which worked well to warm her back up from their short stint out in the snow. She was sitting on the couch now, Eddie besides her having gone over his finances some with Stan in hopes of helping him be in a good spot once his divorce was finalized. Stan was over at the dining table with Richie now to follow up on his promise to look over things for him as well before he 'divorced' his agent.

"Fuck, Richie, how do you keep track of any of this? It's a fucking mess." Stan scowled as Richie just gave a shrug of his shoulders as he leaned over the back of Stan's chair to look at the computer screen. Patty glanced back at them from over the back of the couch, hands wrapped gingerly around the hot cup of coffee.

"Not my thing. How am I supposed to know what to do with all of this?" Patty glanced towards Eddie as she heard him give a soft snort of amusement at the comment. He met her eyes with an amused look on his face as he shifted carefully on the couch. She had noticed how he favored his right side over the course of the night. Even when they'd been walking down to the restaurant, she had seen how Richie had stuck close to that side of him and Eddie had a few times leaned against him as if feeling a bit weak or pained. Stan had mentioned he'd been injured somehow though hadn't gone into many details. Patty had assumed it couldn't have been that serious of an injury but now she wasn't so certain.

“We were in the same honors math classes together, Rich, I know you’re not as much of a dumbass as you try to act. Please at least tell me that you have someone who does your taxes so I don’t have to worry about you going to jail for tax evasion?”

When Richie rested his chin on the top of Stan’s head he got shooed away and Stan gently kicked a chair out from the table and motioned for him to sit down. It was clear that Richie’s finances were going to take a bit longer to look through than Eddie’s but Patty didn’t mind.

“Yeah, yeah. I pay my taxes, okay? I just…don’t really balance this shit out all the time. As long as I know that I’m not in the red I figure things are good.” Patty raised her eyebrows knowing well enough how Stan would react to that sort of comment. A second later she heard Stan’s exasperated sigh that turned into a soft chuckle and complaint as Richie reached over to mess with his hair.

So full of life for someone who wanted to die.

She felt another wave of sadness wash over her at the thought. She wasn’t used to feeling like she didn’t understand Stanley. They had always been so in sync with each other; always aware of the other’s feelings except for the one time it had mattered the most. Patty sighed as she took a sip of her coffee, closing her eyes as she lost herself in the warmth that help chase away that fluttering fear. When she looked up, she realized that Eddie was watching her and it threw her off a little to be the one being observed for once. She gave him a soft smile, wasn’t certain if it was the wine or that sense of familiarity rubbing off on her as she decided to speak her thoughts.

“He’s different with you two. Or, I guess not different, just… more himself than he is with most people.” Patty made sure to keep her voice quiet and soft as she spoke so that Stan wouldn’t hear her. She shifted a little, tucking her legs underneath herself on the couch and facing Eddie a little more fully. Eddie moved a bit too, glanced towards the other two for a second before tucking himself carefully up on the couch as well. There was that extra care taken of his right side once more, a slight wince of pain. It had definitely not been a minor injury then.

“How do you mean?”

Patty glanced towards the table for a second as she tried to think how best to voice when she meant. If anyone would understand what she was getting at it would likely be one of Stan’s friends. One of the Losers he seemed so fond of.

“I always thought I knew him the best. When we first met, I knew there was something about him. He’s an old soul, I guess, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Still can’t, to be honest, and the fact that he decided I was worth his time seemed like winning the lottery. I thought I was really the only one that he let in close. That got to see all of him. People have always been drawn to Stan but he tends to keep everyone at arm’s length. I suppose I thought I was the only exception until I saw him with you two…”

Patty trailed off a little as she saw Stan give her a curious look from over the top of the laptop and she gave him a reassuring smile. He smiled back though she knew, Patty knew he could sense that they were talking about something personal. She wasn’t the only observant one in their relationship.

“It seems to me like you know him as well as we do. We might see slightly different sides is all. We, uh…all of us together dealt with some things when we were younger. Things that can be hard to explain if you weren’t there.” Eddie kept his voice quiet and low as well, matched her own and she could hear his uncertainty. He was trying to tread a line, trying to determine just how much she didn’t know in regards to whatever shared trauma they’d experienced as kids. “It’s obvious how much he loves you, ya know?”

Patty gave a soft laugh at the comment, felt endeared by the amount of concern that Eddie seemed to have over whether she truly knew this or not. He was sweet, Eddie, even with his somewhat brash language and impulse to bicker. He cared and was a kind soul.

“Oh, I know. Not to sound conceited but I have no doubt that he loves me. Just as I love him. I just wish I understood-“ Patty stopped herself, felt that fluttering sadness at her throat once more and she took another drink of her coffee in an attempt to chase it away. There was a moment of silence between them as she rested her

coffee cup in her lap. Wished she could soak in every bit of warmth it contained to help chase away that sad chill in her heart. The fear that, without understanding why it had happened, that whatever sadness had struck him would come for Stan once more. That she might not be on time, may not realize soon enough how drastically wrong things had gone.

She felt Eddie's hand rest lightly on her wrist, a gentle touch meant to comfort and she tried to find her smile once more. Knew that it wavered a bit around the edges.

"Have you two talked about what happened?"

It seemed like Eddie was an observant one as well. Patty made a quiet noise that was somewhere between amusement and a sob. She pursed her lips together tightly in surprise, glanced towards the table to see if Stan had heard her. He was frowning at the screen still though she knew that part of him was focused on them. Richie was looking in their direction but dropped his eyes when he realized she was looking back. He wasn't as good at subtlety.

"We have, some…" Patty set a hand on top of Eddie's in return, patted it softly as she felt him give her wrist a light squeeze. "I know it's not because we can't have kids like he said. We had both come to peace with that, accepted it and had even discussed adoption in the future. He wouldn't have done it because of that."

It felt like a relief to voice it out loud even in the hushed tone of secrets. She looked up to meet Eddie's eyes, could see that sense of guilt. He must never have been able to really hide anything, not with how open and honest his eyes were. She found with most people that the phrase 'the eyes are the window to the soul' didn't quite fit but with Eddie it seemed to.

"If you know that isn't the truth, why haven't you asked him?"

"Oh, I…I figure he didn't tell me the truth for a reason. And I don't want to push him to talk if he isn't ready to. I know Stan, he'll talk to me about what really happened when he's good and ready. And I've never wanted to come across as the overbearing wife…"

“Patty, I know we’ve just met. But I can promise you that you’re incapable of being the overbearing wife. Talk to him, let him know that you want to understand. And if he tells you, listen. Even if it sounds really fucking ridiculous, listen and trust that he’s telling the truth.” Eddie had a hint of something in his voice, something that she for once couldn’t quite read. It was even clearer to her that Stan’s friends knew the truth; that these people who seemed to have apparated out of thin air knew the reasons she had almost lost her Stanley.

She glanced towards Stan, caught his eye once more and gave a nod.

“Alright…I will.”

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“What were you and Patty talking about last night?”

Eddie looked up from the dishes from their breakfast as Richie sat at the dining table with his feet propped up on another one of the chairs. He made no effort to stifle the large yawn that dragged itself out of him and Eddie felt a little bit of pity that he had to go out for the day. Patty and Stan had headed back down to their own room rather late last night and it had felt too soon when Richie’s alarm had gone off at seven in the morning.

Eddie felt a bit hesitant to bring up his conversation with Patty while Stan and Richie had been distracted with their attempt at making sense of Richie’s financial accounts. He wasn’t certain he had done the right thing encouraging her to ask Stan about what had happened. The fact that Stan hadn’t wanted to be the weak link that brought them all down in their fight against It wasn’t something that would be easy for others to understand.

“She knows that Stan didn’t tell her the truth about…you know.” Eddie hated saying it, that Stan had tried to kill himself. That he had almost succeeded and that there seemed to be a very real possibility that it was only due to the fact that they had defeated It that had saved him.

“Oh…wow, that’s…” Richie made a grimace as he let his feet drop back down to the floor. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“No, coming from me she would have thought I was fucking crazy. I did tell her that she needed to talk to Stan about it though. She’s worried about being ‘overbearing’.” Eddie sighed, hoped that in the end he’d find that he’d done the right thing. Richie gave a snort and Eddie looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

“You have some experience with overbearing wives. I hope you told her she’s got nothing on your soon-to-be ex-mom-wife.” Eddie raised one of his rubber gloved fingers in Richie’s direction though he laughed softly at the comment despite himself. “Is that supposed to be a suggestion, Eds? Thought we were waiting to get down and dirty.”

“You’re disgusting.” Eddie wrinkled his nose, tried not to think of that petri dish of death. “And I did tell her that she’s the furthest thing from overbearing. She’s good for him.”

“Hmm, yeah. Yeah, she is. She’s a peach.” Richie stood up and moved over to stand behind him. Eddie felt Richie’s arms slip around him, hugged around his waist as his chin came to rest on Eddie’s shoulder.

He leaned back against him, making a huff of complaint as Richie rubbed his scruffy cheek against his neck in return. They had maybe gotten a little laxer with their rule that they weren’t going to move forward with their relationship until the divorce was finalized. Part of that was how long it was taking for Myra to finally let that happen. Part of it was that now that they had this chance it was hard not to relish in it some.

Eddie lost himself for a moment as he picked up another glass to lightly scrub out before he added it to the dishwasher. He had been taking the time to clean despite the fact that he knew that housekeeping would take care of it for them if they wanted. He still found a sense of comfort in the act of cleaning though, an easing of that tension that lingered as he waited for Myra to decide she was done drawing this out.

The divorce should have been finalized weeks ago but Myra kept pushing that she felt they could reconcile. Refused the sign the papers that would make him finally free. She had pushed several times for them to meet and talk on their own without the lawyers or Richie. Eddie had refused every single one of these requests; not just because he didn't want her to try and talk him into staying but also because he was constantly consciously aware of the deadlight visions. That Richie had seen Myra drug him, poison him, whether because she misjudged the dose or intentionally.

"I think I might hire Stan to do accounting shit for me." Eddie felt Richie's breath on his neck, cool where he'd just give him a bit of stubble burn. His voice dragged him back out of his chain of thoughts though they continued to leave a sick feeling in his chest. He did his best to distract himself away from it; pressed a little further against Richie.

"You sure he's going to want to deal with your bullshit all the time?" Eddie reached to set the glass in the top rack of the dish washer while trying to maintain that closeness with Richie. This resulted in them both leaning a bit to the right, Richie moving with him as if sensing that Eddie wanted him to stay close for a bit longer.

"Please, he loved every second of sorting through my shit. It will probably be the most challenging job he's ever taken on." Richie spoke against his neck now, lips pressed to his skin just below his ear and Eddie felt a small thrill go through him. He pulled away for just a moment, felt Richie's noise of disappointment as he turned to face Richie. Eddie leaned up for a moment to place a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth while keeping his still gloved hands held up and out of the way so he didn't drip any of the dirty dish water on either of them.

"Don't you have to get ready to go?" Eddie frowned as he carefully worked on removed the gloves as he tried to side step around Richie despite that sense of anxiety still lingering. A knot in his chest that wasn't entire because of the scar tissue that had formed between his ribs.

"Please, don't fucking remind me. Couldn't I just stay home with you? Keep each other warm." Richie tried to pull him back,

trapping Eddie's wet gloves between them.

"Oh, come the fuck on, jack ass. This water is disgusting. Stop." Eddie tried to fight back, pushing at Richie as he kept hugging him closer. Eddie flicked some of the water at him, dotting his glasses with it before he finally broke free and could strip the dish gloves off his hands. As he tossed them into the sink to dry Richie caught him up in his arms again and Eddie gave a soft laugh.

"I'm already firing my agent. Can't I just blow this whole thing off?" Richie whined as he buried his face against Eddie's neck once more causing his glasses to fumble off and to the floor somewhere behind him. Eddie gave a sigh, gave in a little as he looped his arms around Richie in return and smoothed his hands down along his back. His side ached a little but it wasn't an ache he could regret just at that moment. Not with Richie blowing against his skin in emphasis; the feel of his arms around him, warm and encompassing.

"You committed yourself to this holiday show bull. If you want to actually tell jokes you *want* to tell, you better go participate in the table reading or whatever the hell you're supposed to be doing today." Eddie pressed a kiss into Richie's hair as they stood there in the center of what was their temporary kitchen. He'd be glad when they could find something more permanent together.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. You're going to be okay here on your own for today since Stan and Patty are going over to the Met? I'm sure if you wanted to go with them, they'd be happy to have you." Eddie shook his head at the suggestion and Richie finally let him go so he could look at him questioningly.

"I don't want to interrupt their date day, Richie. Besides, we'll be doing dinner again tonight. I'm probably just going to clean up and get a bit of extra rest." Eddie honestly would welcome some peace and quiet. A chance to get a little extra sleep even if it was possible. He felt world's better than he did after he'd first been released from the hospital but his ribs still ached and his breath came up short from time to time. It was worse with the cold.

"Yeah, might not be a bad plan, Spaghetti head. I'll be back

as soon as I can." Richie pressed a kiss to his forehead this time and Eddie smiled before reaching up and giving Richie's cheek a pat.

"Go get ready."

"Yes sir. I love it when you're bossy."

"Shut the fuck up, idiot."

*

Patty and Stan had stopped by shortly before Richie headed out just to make sure they knew what time to plan for dinner. After that Eddie had found himself alone in the suite that had seemed quiet and empty around him. He had taken some time to do more of that cleaning, making certain the place was up to specs until he found himself wearing down.

Eddie had eased himself down on the couch after eating a small snack for lunch; knew he had overdone it as what was typically an ache had turned into an active pain in his side now. He closed his eyes for what he thought was just a few moments before he suddenly awoke back up with a start.

He laid there for a few moments trying to pin down what sound or nightmare had woken him up when he heard the knock at the door of the suite. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before pulling himself up as he glanced at his watch. It had been a few hours and Richie must have gotten back only to realize he'd left his keycard behind. It wouldn't be the first time he'd done it.

Eddie shuffled towards the door, called out to Richie to hold on when he heard him knock once more. The table reading must have gone relatively smoothly if he was back. Either that or Richie had just deciding not to argue on too many points in favor of coming back sooner.

"Next time you forget your keycard, you're sleep outs-" Eddie swung the door open expecting to see Richie look back at him sheepishly and instead finding his words trailing off as a cloying anxiety tried to steal his breath away.

“Eddie, we need to talk.” Myra stood on the door step, having somehow managed to get past the front doorman and to their floor.